

Rivista di poesia comparata

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RECENSIONE

JOSHUA MEHIGAN, *Accepting the Disaster*

New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2014, pp. 82, \$23.00

Joshua Mehigan's collection *Accepting the Disaster* comes a full ten years after his well-received first one, *The Optimist*. The title seems a kind of ironic nod towards the experience gained in the intervening decade, even though the earlier book already had its full share of irony. The voice is recognizably the same, the technical skills are just as assured, but Mehigan has acquired an even greater range and depth.

He already had a gift for the stunning last line: «Wish is the word that sounds like what wind means» was the knock-out conclusion of the first poem in *The Optimist*. In this new book there is nothing quite so showily brilliant; the last lines here, rather, are masterpieces of laconic understatement: «Nothing here ever changes, till it does.» «The worst thing that can happen happened here.»

In each of these cases the lines thwart our desire for a flashy denouement and force us to re-read the poem to appreciate the full significance of their apparent tautology. «You might not know it was unless you knew» concludes one of the two triolets in the volume (*The Optimist* also contained one), entitled *The Crossroads*:

This is the place it happened. It was here.
You might not know it was unless you knew.
All day the cars blow past and disappear.
This is the place it happened. It was here.
Look at the sparkling dust, the oily smear.
Look at the highway marker, still askew.
This is the place it happened. It was here.
You might not know it was unless you knew.

This beautifully exemplifies the way Mehigan makes us imagine a whole tragedy while refusing to narrate it; he achieves some of his finest effects with the most economic of means. The three descriptive details in lines 5 and 6 encapsulate the tragedy, while at the same time evoking the world in which so many of these stories happen (or fail to happen). The «sparkling dust» and «oily smear» point to the post-industrial landscapes of such poems as *The Smokestack* and *The Cement Plant*. In the former poem the smokestack is described in a series of dazzlingly imaginative analogies, which fully express the way this towering object dominates not only the landscape but also the lives and consciousness of those who live under its shadow; it manages to be both sinister and insidiously beautiful: «On cool summer evenings, / it billowed like azure silk. / On cold winter mornings, / it spread like spilled milk.» In *The Cement Plant* the dust is not sparkling but all-pervasive; as he states in one laconic line: «Dust gave them jobs, and killed some of them.»

In this volume one could say that the highway markers are frequently askew; when we think we have understood the tone of voice and the direction that a poem is taking, we soon realize that we have been subtly misdirected. The one-sentence sonnet *Heard at the Men's Mission* begins with what appear to be a series of contemptuous descriptions of the world's rejects («sons-of-bitches no one loves») but ends with a rhetorical question that suggests a real compassion for their fate; on the way, the sentence gives us a number of grim descriptive details («guys no one touches without latex gloves, / squirming with lice, themselves a bunch of pests, / their cheeks and noses pocked like grapefruit rind») and the surreal image of an encounter with an archangel. The mixture of religious language and earthy realism is achieved with amazing naturalness within the strict confines of the sonnet form.

Some of the finest poems in the book are extremely short. *Down in the Valley*, with its already quoted last line («The worst thing that can happen happened here») hints at a story of brutal murder in just nine lines, while on the surface simply recounting the beauties of spring («Now, under sapling pine trees in the clearing, / snowdrops are coming back to their old places»). In the eight lines of *Epitaph Carved on a Shinbone* Mehigan hints at the world of Sherlock Holmes, with the intriguingly unexplained lines: «That night, his sheepdog didn't growl or bark. / The door was open. He didn't raise his hands.» The poet's skill often seems to lie in his choice of what not to say—or, at least, what not to say too explicitly.

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As already indicated, understatement is Mehigan's speciality. The reasons for this tendency can be found, perhaps, in the illuminating essay he wrote for *Poetry Magazine* in 2011, *I Thought You Were a Poet*. Candidly admitting to having been «extensively treated for what insurance companies resourcefully call 'behavioral health' problems», he specifically rejects the notion of poetry as the expression of uncontrolled states of mind. He quotes Foucault: «Madness is precisely the *absence of the work of art*» and points out that «When Lear is mad, he speaks prose.» Referring to his own past as an alcoholic, he says: «Like countless drunks, I longed to be a drunk. But I'm pleased that when I got my wish I knew I was a ridiculous cliché. Alcoholism is the zenith of sensational and boring.» Poetry, it seems, is the remedy against such «liquid derangement»: «But because forethought and discretion rarely appear in my personal life, I like to cultivate them in my poems.»

This certainly helps to understand his admiration for poets like Edgar Bowers or Philip Larkin, who always demonstrate a firm sense of outward control over both their matter and their form; this is evident in the steady rhythms of his blank verse in such poems as *Shark's Tooth*, which concludes the book, and which seems deliberately to nod towards Bowers in both its form and its setting. However, in his essay Mehigan also admits to being fascinated by madness: «many of the poets I love make good strategic use of difficulty, ellipsis, and fragmentation.» The longest poem in this book, at least in terms of page-numbers, is *The Orange Bottle*, which is a magnificent narrative of a descent into schizophrenia, as suffered by a patient who decides to stop taking his medications. The story is recounted in effective ballad-stanzas, which are handled with the brilliance of Bishop in *The Burglar of Babylon* or James Merrill in *Days of 1935*. At one nightmarish moment, as the protagonist walks out into the «terrible world / of children and daffodils growing», the stanza is elongated, the rhymes are reiterated, and the lines sprawl out into serpentine length, *à la* Ogden Nash: «and the two old sisters out in wool sweaters with their wrinkled cheeks pinkly glowing, / and the pretty lady who would give birth by Christmas barely showing but showing...»

The ballad stanza proves a brilliant choice for capturing not only the feelings of paranoia and self-loathing that afflict the protagonist, but also the violent treatment to which he is eventually subjected. One recurring rhyme is with the word «poison». It first occurs after he has quit his medication («'Don't take me!' cried the poison.»[...] and the garden gate groaned and yawned / and let a little noise in»); eight stanzas later the first line is repeated, but now his psychotic state has become acute, and the «garden gate» has proliferated into a series of alarming, almost apocalyptic images:

And the gate to the wicked city gaped,
and the gates of the temple screamed and screamed,
and the gates of the garden groaned and yawned,
and the gates of the ziggurat gabbled in grief
and sucked all life's sorrows and joys in.

The same rhyme occurs at the very end of the poem, the protagonist having finally been forced to accept the necessity of his medications; this time the order of words is reversed so that the word «poison» concludes the whole poem:

And the church bells rang
and a dinner bell tinkled
and the school bell tolled
and called all the good girls and boys in.
And all of them brought all their toys in.
And all of them swallowed their poison.

With such subtle variations Mehigan succeeds in using the ballad stanza to communicate a wide range of emotional states and ways of seeing. This ability to match form with matter to stunning effect is the distinguishing mark of the whole volume, whether it be the dactylic beat of the plural nouns that conclude nearly all of the lines in the apocalyptic title poem, with a relentless hammering persistence; or the deftly turned sonnets and triolets that shine with epigrammatic brilliance; or the supple blank verse of the narratives (or thwarted narratives). We can only hope we do not have to wait another ten years for the next volume.

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